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Helicon Hall: An Experiment in Living

Edith Summers Kelley

Edited with an Introduction by Mary Byrd Davis

In "Helicon Hall: An Experiment in Living" Edith Summers Kelley described several members of the cooperative colony of 1906 to 1907. She said nothing about her own achievements. However, Upton Sinclair characterized her in his autobiography of 1932 as "the girl who was my secretary at the colony—Edith Summers, [a] golden-haired and shrewdly observant young person whose gentle voice and unassuming ways gave us no idea of her talent. She is now Mrs. Edith Summers Kell[e]y, author of the novel called "Weeds"; and after the literary tumult and shouting have died this is one of the books that students will be told to read."¹ Edith Summers Kelley's writing was not limited to *Weeds*, although this is her finest work; and, apart from the praise of a few critics such as Upton Sinclair, she began only in the 1970s to receive the recognition she deserves.

During much of her adult life she was forced to be concerned not so much with how to achieve an early ambition to be recognized as a writer² as with how to earn enough money or to grow enough food to survive. Born in Ontario in 1884,³ she graduated from the University of Toronto in 1903, head of her class, with a specialty in modern languages including English.⁴ Subsequently she was on the staff of Funk and Wagnall's in New York, where, by working on a dictionary, she did permanent damage to her eyes. She became secretary to Upton Sinclair; and, at the colony he founded met Sinclair Lewis, to whom she was engaged for a brief time, and his friend Allan Updegraff, whom she married. She and Updegraff had two children, Barbara and Ivor; and together published a translation from Italian of Giuseppe Giacosa's plays *The Stronger*, *Like Falling Leaves*, *Sacred Ground*.⁵ Although during some portion of Edith Summers Kelley's years in New York she earned money by selling stories to magazines,⁶ she apparently supported the family by teaching evening classes in the Hell's Kitchen section of

Manhattan.⁷ The marriage did not last, and she became the common-law wife of C. Fred Kelley, a sculptor who had lived as a boy "on a prosperous Oklahoma wheat ranch." The couple "longed for freedom from routine, open country, sunshine, leisure and a sense of independence" and "burned inwardly with artistic ambitions."⁸ Around 1914 they committed themselves to earning their living from the land, a venture which became a struggle of approximately ten years.⁹ First they rented a seven hundred-acre tobacco farm in Scott County, Kentucky, which they cultivated with the help of tenants, although they themselves lived in a tenant shack. They then farmed a hundred and forty acres in New Jersey, a sixty-acre ranch near El Centro, Imperial County, California, and finally half an acre in northern San Diego.¹⁰ A son, Patrick, was born in New Jersey. In 1921, while laboring in the Imperial Valley, Mrs. Kelley conceived the idea of basing a novel on her experiences in Kentucky. *Weeds* was published in 1923, after Sinclair Lewis had recommended her to his publishers, Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace.¹¹ The novel received generally favorable reviews but sold few copies. Upton Sinclair helped her in 1924 to obtain a grant to begin a second novel, but she experienced difficulty in writing *The Devil's Hand* and did not publish it. Apparently she was unable to find publishers for short stories, essays, and poems she wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. The financial situation of the family gradually improved, nevertheless. The Kelleys suffered during the Depression, but before Edith Kelley died in 1956, she and her husband had been able to spend ten years in comfort in Los Gatos, California.¹²

Edith Summers Kelley's writing gained attention after Matthew J. Bruccoli bought a copy of *Weeds*, simply because letters of the author and the English and American editions of the book were for sale as an intriguing package. Discovering that the novel was "a quiet masterpiece," he persuaded Southern Illinois University Press to publish it in 1972.¹³ The same press brought out *The Devil's Hand* in 1974, and Popular Library the following year printed a paperback edition of *Weeds*. The two novels are similar in several respects. Each is a realistic description of farm life in a particular section of the United States in the early twentieth century: *Weeds* is set in northern Kentucky around the time of World War I; *The Devil's Hand* depicts Imperial Valley, California, in the early 1920s. In each, those working the land suffer hardships which are exacerbated by the callousness of the wealthy. Central to each is the struggle of a woman with the limits imposed by her biological

and social role. The contents of *Weeds* are, however, more completely integrated than those of *The Devil's Hand*, in which certain characters seem to have been created primarily to convey a social message. Joseph Wood Krutch, reviewing *Weeds* in 1923, wrote that the underlying theme is "the gradual dissipation of the glamor of youth, love, and life, and the gradual coming on of the light of common day."¹⁴ In the novel Mrs. Kelley describes the aging of Judith Pippinger, daughter of a tenant farmer, who as a child is more energetic and more alert mentally than the neighboring girls, but who, like them, early becomes worn out by toil and by child bearing. The novel raises questions for which it provides no answers. One of the most haunting stems from a paradox in man's relationship to the natural world. Judith gains much of the little joy she experiences through her appreciation for the beauty of the land, the sky, and the creatures around her; but the harshness of a life lived close to, even as a part of, the natural world, crushes her. She and the other residents of northern Scott County, like the tobacco they grow, are described in the title, *Weeds*.

"Helicon Hall: An Experiment in Living" is of interest as a source of information about Edith Summers Kelley and about the Helicon Home Colony and its other members, a number of whom became writers of some consequence. The final pages serve also as an illustration of Mrs. Kelley's ability to recreate scenes experienced years earlier, an ability which underlies the effectiveness of her novels. The essay is printed here from the typescript in the Special Collections Department, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, with the kind permission of Patrick Kelley and of the library. The text is presented as it appears in Mrs. Kelley's draft, except that a few emendations have been made to increase readability in the first pages and to conform to normal styling.

Those of us who have reached the age of retrospection will understand me when I say that there are periods in the past of each one of us that have a special something all their own: that last year in high school, or perhaps the first in college, that summer at your uncle's place in the mountains when you were just turned twenty. Such times come back through the years accompanied by a subtle

perfume, a whiff of incense faint and elusive. To me, and I think probably to most of the others who shared that experience, Helicon Hall is one of those beauty spots of the past.

It is now more than a quarter of a century, twenty-seven years to be exact, since Helicon Hall came to its sudden and tragic end. But I remember as though it were yesterday how, one chilly October evening, I opened a conventional looking big front door, passed to the end of a short, wide hallway, and stood transfixed with amazement and delight before what I saw. In front of me lay a garden of palms, flowers, tropical ferns, and at one end of this a great glowing fire. What a sight to greet one out of the dusk of a gray northern autumn evening! I gasped. This vision of exotic beauty, this Persian garden out of some Arabian Nights tale, this was to be my home!

About a year before the day when I first opened that big front door onto a tropical paradise, I happened upon an advertisement in the newspaper. An author wanted a secretary; I wanted a job, so I wrote to the author. As I had had previous experiences with authors who advertised for secretaries, I had little hope that my letter would lead to anything worthwhile. However, a day or two later the author called upon me, a slight, pale young man carelessly dressed and with country mud still on his shoes. He had a high, thoughtful brow and looked at me candidly with a pair of large, earnest eyes of great beauty. As he talked he smiled an odd, embarrassed looking smile. He was not at all like any of the "authors" I had met before. This young man was Upton Sinclair, who, a few months later, was to set the whole country in an uproar with his book *The Jungle*.

That was how I became Mr. Sinclair's secretary. He had for some time cherished the idea of a cooperative colony to simplify the routine details of living for people who wished to give themselves to other things than routine detail, and especially for those among them who had little children to bring up. When *The Jungle* laid at his feet an unexpected fortune, he immediately set about realizing this dream. He gathered about him a little group of people who were minded to try this experiment; and then one evening he came home with great news! On the edge of the little town of Englewood, New Jersey, five miles up the Hudson from New York City and close to the Palisades, he had found just the place for the colony. It had been built for a boys' school. The proprietor of this boys' school, an idealist it would seem, had had

the school constructed after the pattern of a building that had taken his eye somewhere in Egypt. His idea had been to surround his boys with every beauty and refinement. These beauties and refinements had apparently not made the desired appeal to the growing young barbarians, for the school had not been a success, and now the buildings and grounds were for sale. It was called Helicon Hall, and what better name could there be for the colony?

In October we moved in, at first just a few earnest young souls fiercely determined to arrange it all so that we could devote ourselves to the higher things of life. As we sit at the evening meal in our big dining room, let me introduce you to a few of our Helicon Hall pioneers and tell you what they will have arrived at twenty-seven years from now. We sit Greek fashion at narrow tables arranged in the form of a rectangle with one side open, and have placed our founder and leader in the middle of the side opposite the open space. The lovely dark girl beside him is his wife, Meta.¹⁵ Already you know him by sight; and among his friends he is always gentle, kind, boyish, and unpretentious. In spite of his recent success he is now rather scornfully regarded by the literati, but he will live to command the attention and respect of the whole world. Twenty-seven years from now he will be the author of some forty or more novels and plays, which will be widely translated. His name will be a familiar sound in every quarter of the globe; and the unpopular cause which he staunchly champions will have gained hundreds of thousands of adherents through the reading of his books.

That young man with the slow, quiet smile, the composed manner and the beautifully modulated voice, whose accent bespeaks him a son of old Boston, is William Pepperell Montague.¹⁶ He is only a humble instructor at Columbia; but twenty-seven years from now he will be one of her most esteemed and respected professors of philosophy. The kindly-faced older man, who boasts the only gray hairs in the colony, is William Noyes.¹⁷ He too is a teacher at Columbia; and he and his wife Anna,¹⁸ who sits beside him, will both be well known as educators.

The young man who sits second from Dr. Montague looks enough like him to be his brother. He also has a slow, quiet smile, a pleasantly modulated voice and a Boston accent. Now he is only a struggling young newspaper reporter with an itch to do some writing on his own account, but no time to do it in. Twenty-seven years from now his novels will be in public libraries all over the

country; his short stories will slip into homes between the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines. At this moment, if you tune in your radio of a Saturday evening, you may listen to his quaint humor and gentle, wise philosophy. His name is Freeman Tilden.¹⁹

The tall, spare, ascetic looking man with the unmistakably Swedish cast of countenance is Edwin Bjorkman.²⁰ When he came to this country at the age of twenty-five, all the English he knew was what he had learned in his Swedish high school. He is not much over thirty now, but he has been for several years a newspaper man. He too has an ardent desire to leave the paper far behind and do some writing of his own. Twenty-seven years from now he will be known as a translator of Strindberg and many other Scandinavian writers, a novelist of distinction, a stylist and a writer of articles on subjects philosophical and sociological.

Sitting next to him is one of our most picturesque characters. Note the long, aristocratic head, the mop of lustrous black curls and the "poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling." Yes, he's a Welshman, every inch of him. As he gets up to leave the table, notice how tall he is and with what a valorous, youthful swagger he carries himself. His name is Michael Williams,²¹ and we all call him Mike. Mike too has literary aspirations; and his ability is not less I think than that of some of the others that I have mentioned. But something peculiar is going to happen to him. He was brought up a Catholic; and, in the explosive teens, with one of his grand, sweeping gestures, he threw away his religion and all that went with it. Later in life he is going to go back to the place where he threw it away, pick it up, wipe the dust off it, and become again, not merely a Catholic, but a militant Catholic; for Mike is one of those people who can do nothing by halves. For years and years he will be the editor of an important Catholic paper and all his talents will be devoted to expounding and defending the faith that at this moment he so regally spurns. You never can tell about Welshmen.

Notice the women who are sitting with two little girls between them. They are sisters, Alice MacGowan and Grace MacGowan Cooke, and the little girls are Mrs. Cooke's daughters.²² They make their living by writing stories for magazines; twenty-seven years from now they will still be doing so. They don't pretend to be geniuses—just plain craftswomen and no nonsense about it. The older little girl, with the fair braids wound round her head, is going to marry Harry Leon Wilson.²³ She is only twelve years old now;

but in just a few years she will be the wife of that knight of the typewriter—and a few years after that his ex-wife.

Beside Mrs. Cooke sits a youth with a "young before he's old" look, talking to a pretty girl on his other side—lovely, but a dangerous person, none other than a niece of Emma Goldman.²⁴ Already the youth, Allan Updegraff,²⁵ is a poet of no little distinction. Twenty-seven years from now he will have a number of ultrasophisticated novels to his credit, and will be living in Paris, with the other sophisticated Americans.

This young man is a student from Yale. He and a fellow student read about Helicon Hall, and, fired with a desire to take part in the novel experiment, came here to be janitors and handymen about the place. I have a vivid recollection of my first meeting with that fellow student. One crisp morning, when I came downstairs to breakfast, I found a group of our colonists gathered about a new arrival who seemed to have aroused considerable interest. Coming closer I saw that he was a lean, lanky, red-headed youth in a brand new pair of blue overalls, stiff from the factory and as yet unsullied by spot or stain. They were in fact the newest appearing overalls that I have ever seen on a human being. This young man had everybody listening to his quips and cracks. The red hair and the bright blue overalls made a bold splash of color. There was something about the young man's personality that was like that bold splash of color. He kept saying odd, whimsical things when you least expected them. He seemed "as brisk as a body louse and as merry as a beggar."

Late that afternoon he popped his red head into the office, where I was finishing a letter. A fresh breeze seemed to come with him.

"Hey there! Say, I don't know your name, but I think I'll call you Cherub, if you don't mind. What do you say we go for a walk?"

The whimsical, puckish ways of this frivolous young man and his odd, will-o'-the-wisp humor caused the more staid residents of the Hall to rather condescend to him and take him not so very seriously. But twenty-seven years later, he is a man whose name and face are familiar to everybody in the United States who looks at a newspaper or magazine. He is generally accounted America's leading novelist, and is the winner of a Nobel Prize for literature. His name is Sinclair Lewis.²⁶

It was some time before we could get things settled and running smoothly in our new home. The building was only sparsely

furnished, and so those of the colonists who had furniture of their own were encouraged to bring it with them. After it was installed it might have to be moved again the following week. For perhaps the colonist was one who liked to sleep late in the morning, and, finding himself in an east room, desired to make a trade with somebody in a west room who had to make an early morning street car every day.

There was much sweeping and hammering; and our college boys, who soon became known as "Red" and "Upde," had plenty of bedsprings and chests of drawers and rolled-up rugs to tote from room to room. On occasions they cursed these articles and their owner in no uncertain terms, though on the whole they were good natured enough about it. They had just recently discovered Yeats, and were steeped in him at the moment. As they worked, they broke out from time to time with oddly appropriate quotations from the Irish poet. When it came to working in the laundry, they took a determined stand of refusal. They helped once; and after that they would have no more of that "mouse gray water."²⁷

As the colony was very much an experiment, ideas as to the practical working out of its details were necessarily a bit vague at the start. The colonists were the sort of people who do not like the idea of a servant class, the sort of people who believe that a little physical labor, even of the most menial sort, is not beneath the dignity of anybody, and who look forward to the time—perhaps not so very far away now—when we will be no longer masters and servants, but all just human beings, free to seek our salvation each in his own way. The thought of a brawny-armed cook from an employment agency just did not fit in with colony ideas. So an experiment was tried. The women colonists who wished to do so took turns doing the cooking. Ah, those were interesting gastronomic days! Mrs. P. was an ultraradical in matters pertaining to human nutrition, a strict vegetarian, an abhorrer of tea and coffee, and one who belligerently refused to put one grain of salt in any article of food, stoutly maintaining that nature had put in all that was required. When she held sway in the kitchen, we drank water or milk; we ate unsalted mush for breakfast, and lentil loaf, flanked by many unsalted vegetables, for dinner; and gnawed at hard crackers, a good deal like dog biscuit, for the good of our teeth. Mrs. G. came from somewhere in the South and had been raised on fried chicken, hot biscuit and candied sweet potatoes. When she cooked, we gorged along the general lines just indicated.

These sudden and drastic changes in diet were rather hard on stomachs and tempers; and remarks from the dining room filtering into the kitchen did not help the situation there nor lessen the hard feeling constantly growing among the various cooks. These latter began handing in their resignations; and at last the management was reduced to just what it had scorned in the beginning, a brawny-armed cook from an employment agency. After that things went better.

But most of our workers did not come from employment agencies. There was Miss W., for instance, a large, dark woman of commanding appearance, who did chambermaid work. She was a philosophical anarchist and a vegetarian of the deepest dye. You will infer from the fact that she was an anarchist that her morals were none too rigid. Anarchism and immorality go together, don't they? But listen to this: our two Yale boys, ferreting around as boys will do, had found up in the attic a number of plaster statuettes, reproductions of well-known pieces of Greek statuary. They took these and decorated their room with them. The next day, when Miss W. went in to do up the room, she removed all the statuettes of ladies without clothes. The boys indignantly searched the Hall until they found the statuettes where Miss W. had hidden them, brought them back and returned them to their places, only to have them removed again the next day. This went on for some time and was the cause for much loud complaint on the part of the boys whose morals were being so carefully looked after. Just how it ended I don't remember.

The colony was run along the general lines of a boarding house or family hotel. In what way then did it differ from a boarding house, you ask. And I answer, in almost every way. Eight dollars a week was the amount paid by the colonists who did no work on the place. In New York City at the time one could to be sure get a fair grade of board and room for eight dollars a week. But it would end there—just board and room. What did you get at Helicon Hall for your eight dollars, under the cooperative plan? At Helicon Hall the windows of your room looked out upon lawns and big trees and flower gardens; and the door opened upon a gallery that hung above a tropical garden. When you got up you could throw on your bathrobe and run down and take a turn in the swimming pool. Or, if you were less heroic and preferred a warm shower, the shower rooms were waiting for you. If you had little children you did not have to hire a nursemaid to mind them all day, but could

have them taken care of in the nursery. When you came home at night, instead of sitting down to a grumpy boardinghouse table surrounded by the usual boardinghouse types, you ate your dinner seated between a Socialist and a Single Tax man, the one perhaps a college professor, the other a carpenter, or perhaps at the elbow of an aspiring young writer, or beside an artist who was getting ready to startle the world. With such assorted company as this, the dinner hour is at least never dull. After dinner there were many things that you could do. You could try your skill at a game of billiards in our really palatial billiard room; for the best had been considered none too good for the young gentlemen of Helicon Hall. When you tired of that, you could join the dancing couples in the big reception room, or, when snow was on the ground, go out and ride the bobsleds with a merry group of young folk. Or if you preferred conversation—ah, there was something that we could give you without stint—all you had to do was sit down by the fireplace.

This fireplace was our pride and joy. It stood in the main entrance hall, just beyond the south end of the patio. To the south of it the main staircase went up and the big pipe organ stood built into the wall. It was a middle-of-the-room fireplace, beautifully proportioned, and with four sides, of which you could take your pick. In the middle hung a huge brazier of glowing coals. You could sit in front of these glowing coals and look into the lacy foliage of a garden that lay at your elbow. At night, when the moon shone, it filled this garden with magical lights and shadows and silhouetted in black the branches of the tall rubber tree that reached to the very top of the high glass roof. When there was no moon the stars twinkled through into a warm darkness of vaguely outlined palms and vines. This fireplace was so large that a group conversing on one side of it was in no way interfered with by a similar group on another side. Those of us who patronized the fireplace fell into the habit of having a favorite side; and one of our members named these sides according to the type of activity that went on there. Philosophy, Philology, Philanthropy and Philander were the names of the four sides. You could take your choice. Only if you happened to get on the Philander side at the wrong time you might not be so very welcome.

According to the newspapers that was all we did—philander. Enterprising young reporters, anxious to endear themselves to the management, wrote the most lively and entertaining stories at our expense. There is no doubt that the reading public—and that means

you and me as well as the other fellow—prefers to read bad things about people. The main objective of a newspaper is to sell papers; and so it tells you all the bad things about people that it can find out, or—with impunity—invent. According to the papers Helicon Hall was a free love colony and nothing else but; and the swarm of long-haired freaks that lived there was concerned wholly with matters of sex. The truth is that we had little time to be obsessed with sex; we were people of many and varied interests, and we all had our livings to make. For our few hours of leisure the colony offered so many wholesome diversions that it was hard to choose between them. I don't say that nobody ever fell in love at Helicon Hall. Remember we were all young; and what a strange lot of young people we would have been if nothing like that had happened. The newspapers would then have been quite justified in calling us freaks.

Most of the colonists, especially the older ones with children, had entered into this undertaking very seriously with the idea of proving something to themselves and to the world. They felt weighing heavily upon their shoulders the responsibility for the success of their venture; and long and anxious were the committee meeting discussions of ways and means. Running the colony turned out to be a good deal like running the government of the United States. The rule had to be democratic of course, and that meant a lot of fingers in the pie. Each individual who had any say in the matter had his own ideas about how the job ought to be done; and in the attempt to reconcile these conflicting ideas, vast quantities of time and energy were consumed. There were innumerable details of the cooperative plan that had to be met as they came up; and they were met from so many opposing angles that the result was not always perfect peace and harmony. Poor Upton Sinclair, who desired nothing more than to mind his own business and let everybody else mind his, found himself forced to preside at most of these committee meetings, to listen to this woman's complaint and that man's harangue and do his best to patch up the differences. He began to take on a harassed look. Above his living quarters there was a little tower room that could be reached only by a ladder. He had this furnished as a study and learned to retreat to it when he felt the urgent need of solitude.

But in spite of inevitable differences of opinion regarding details of conducting the colony, our colonists got along together remarkably well. Friction was mainly confined to the committee

room and forgotten when its door was closed. In fact one of the great charms of the colony was the easy camaraderie, the pleasant casualness, void of strain or pretense, that made up its social atmosphere. It sounds banal to say that we were like one big family; but we actually were—without the endless petty friction that goes on in most families.

One of the main reasons for the absence of this family friction was the fact that the children had their own quarters where they ate, played and slept. I know that many will raise their hands in horror and call these Helicon Hall mothers unnatural creatures. A little unbiased observation, however, will convince anybody that even the most conventional and maternal of mothers likes to be able to eat her meals in peace and quiet and to have her social intercourse with other grown-ups undisturbed by the presence of children. The colony did this for its mothers at the same time that it gave the children a wonderful time and a very desirable training. You know it's always "the more the merrier" with children. Think what fun it must have been for a dozen or more of them, all about the same age, to play together and get up and go to bed together and eat their meals together at little tables and chairs that just fitted them. Of course the mothers visited their children as much as they liked and took them out of the group as much as they liked. There was no hard and fast law about that. But it was soon found that the children left the group less and less willingly; they had a better time with their little playmates than anywhere that their mother could take them. Incidentally they learned lessons that it is hard to teach a child in the average home. They learned to do for themselves, to give and take on equal terms and to have consideration for others. The children had their world and we had ours and the two went on side by side but not interfering with each other. How many and many a harassed mother has sighed in vain for just such an arrangement as that.

We young people had our world too, we of the teens and early twenties, who had no responsibilities beyond the performance of our allotted tasks. When these were done we were free to come and go as we chose, to sit by the fireplace or in our little tropical garden, or to seek the outdoors with its leaf-strewn, spicy smelling roads through the woods, its rocky Palisades and wide blue river, free to read and talk, to walk and dream, to flirt and fall in love to our hearts' content.

After the fame—or notoriety—of Helicon Hall had spread about

New York, we had many visitors; and on Sundays we were fairly swamped with them. Being freaks ourselves, we naturally attracted other freaks. Greenwich Village came out and looked us over. I can still see the besmoked young women and the men with long hair and flowing ties, the artists and actors and dilettanti of all sorts. Then there were serious minded educators and philanthropists and young Socialist workmen and elderly ladies who were interested in spiritualism or New Thought. They milled about the reception room and the patio and gazed up at the big rubber tree that was trying to get out through the high glass roof, and admired the palms and the vines and the little brook with its water lilies and goldfish and rustic bridges. Not since the Tower of Babel has there arisen such a loud hum of animated conversation. I can see the extraordinary looking Sadakichi Hartmann²⁸—a great German body with a small Japanese head on top of it, and his friend, little Jo Davidson,²⁹ who afterward became a well-known sculptor. We had distinguished visitors too: Professor John Dewey of Columbia and William James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.³⁰ Then there was John Coryell, the gentle, white-haired anarchist, who was the original Nick Carter and Bertha M. Clay.³¹ You get a jolt of surprise sometimes when you find out who started things like that. To be an anarchist, a Nick Carter and a Bertha M. Clay all in one—I call that versatility.

I shall never forget Helicon Hall's one Christmas Eve. It stands out in my memory as the most truly Christmassy Christmas Eve that I have ever known. For weeks beforehand those of us who were frivolous enough to interest ourselves in such matters had been busy devising a jocular present for each member of the colony and writing a bit of verse or parody to go with each present. It was quite an undertaking, for by now there were about sixty of us. The idea was to point a little friendly ridicule at each recipient's pet foible or folly. For instance, for a lady who was rather militant in her aversion to dogs, we purchased a cunning toy puppy and accompanied it with the following:

He prayeth best who loveth best
All dogs, both great and small;
For the dear Lord who loveth us
He loves them, fleas and all.

When Christmas Eve came, our presents, all gaily wrapped and

tagged and with verses attached, were piled under the Christmas tree, which stood in the main entrance hall not far from the fireplace. The stockings of our fourteen little ones hung from the four chimney shelves, waiting for Santa Claus to come down that big chimney. Sprigs of holly were intertwined with fir boughs which filled the air with the pungent smell of Christmas. The children were allowed to join the grown-ups and to stay up late that night. They had their hour of romping about the Christmas tree, gazing in rapture at the hanging stockings and listening to tales of Santa Claus and his reindeer. When at last, worn out with excitement, they were carried sleepily to bed, we older ones turned to such entertainment as we preferred. We had many visitors and the rooms were gay with talk and laughter. There was billiards, for those who felt that way inclined, and dancing in the reception room and talking groups about the fireplace and Christmas carols played softly on the organ. Later in the evening we were all called together about the Christmas tree, and Edwin Bjorkman, our master of ceremonies, presented each one with his present, reading aloud at the same time the verse that accompanied it. There was much good-natured hilarity as we opened and displayed to the assembled multitude the gifts that made us "see ourselves as others see us." After that there was more dancing and billiards and talking by the fireplace and more Christmas carols on the organ. It was all so truly Christmassy, and yet so different from anything that we had ever experienced before. I doubt if there is one among us who does not still carry that evening green in his memory.

The winter slipped by, and there came now and then a whiff of spring in the air. The fig tree growing beside the north stairway in our patio knew when February came, for it swelled its buds just as if it stood under a California sun. March came, with lengthening days; and the colonists began to make plans for the summer, plans of expansion, of additions, tents and cottages. They had ironed out most of their early differences regarding details of administration; and everybody seemed to be in a happy and forward-looking mood, in tune with the returning sun. So, all unsuspecting, we drew nearer and nearer to the fateful Ides of March, of which no soothsayer had warned us to beware.

The fourteenth of March, I remember, was a glorious spring day: melting snow, sunlight dripping from the bare trees, bits of green life showing here and there, and a sky of that tender blue, at once soft and bright, that comes only with a northern springtime. It

was Saturday, a half holiday for me, and I had been invited by one of our young men to go to dinner and the theater. This youth was considered even by us freakish colonists a rather wild visionary. His ideas, advanced in a slow, southern drawl, contrasted rather oddly with his personal character which was unusually mild, gentle and even childlike. I don't know what eventually became of him or to what extent life turned his youthful dreams into nightmares. We called him John the Baptist.³² We left early in the afternoon, for we both had errands to do in town. I was feeling gay and chipper; and I remember noticing, as I ran giddily down the north stairway, that our fig tree was almost in leaf. Alice MacGowan was skipping rope on the south porch for her figure's sake, and called to us cheerily as we passed out to have a good time.

The after-theater trip back to Helicon Hall was always a tedious one: the subway, then the Fort Lee Ferry, and after that another streetcar, often with long waits in between. It was cold that night. The ferry ploughed its way through black water, gray-spotted with ice floes. I'm always pessimistic when I'm cold; and as we paced its deck in the teeth of a bleak, biting wind, I was inclined to take a dark view of existence.

"Cheer up, Cherub," admonished John the Baptist, in that simple, childlike way of his. "You might be worse off. Suppose you were running around barefoot in the snow and had no home to go to."

Little did I dream how soon his words were to come true.

It was about two o'clock when we opened the front door of the Hall and passed into the patio. We stood for a few moments at the fireplace trying to warm ourselves by the dying embers, then went to our respective rooms, where I at once fell into a deep sleep.

I had slept less than two hours when I was awakened by confused noises. I threw on a bathrobe and opened the door of my room. The opposite end of the Hall, where we had so lately stood trying to warm ourselves, was a furnace of roaring flames. Not a person was in sight; but I could hear falling glass and people shouting outside. I ran down into the patio and crossed it, through blinding smoke and cinders, to the east door, which was as yet untouched by the flames. The moment I got outside my ear was struck by terrified screams coming from the direction in which the fire had started. I ran that way and found Upton Sinclair and another colonist, whose name I don't recall, holding a stretched blanket under a window. I took hold of one corner of the blanket. I

shall never forget those screams of terror. Grace MacGowan Cooke, her two children and her sister Alice, were trapped in the rooms above, and there was no exit except by the windows. We kept calling to them to jump; and at last they threw out little Katharine, and Helen, who both landed safely. But when each of the grown women hit the blanket it sagged, and the body struck the frozen ground with a hard thud. If only a fourth person had been there at that moment, those two ladies might have been saved from much suffering. But everybody seemed to be at the other end of the Hall where the children were being carried to safety from their beds in the nursery.

After the two injured ones had been taken away to the hospital, there was nothing for the rest of us to do but stand and watch it all burn. In less than an hour our beautiful home with its billiard room, its pipe organ, its great fireplace and tropical patio, was nothing but a heap of smouldering ashes. There were doubtless more important things to think about; but as we turned away I could not help thinking of our brave little fig tree that had been such a short time ago so full of hope and promise.

It took only an hour to destroy Helicon Hall and all the plans and dreams that were woven into it. But it will always stand in the memory of us who lived there, scattered as we are over the surface of the earth. To us, staid, middle-aged people that we are now, one period of six months is not much different from another. They slip away and leave little to remember them by. But the six months of Helicon Hall was a six months of youth, of vivid new impressions, of loves and friendships, of hopes and dreams, all centered about a big, warm fireplace, a throbbing pipe organ and a tropical garden. Each year they become more precious in the memory, those days when we were all young together.

NOTES

¹*American Outpost: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1932), p. 184.

²Edith Summers Kelley, "Can an Artist Exist in America?", TS, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. I am indebted to Patrick Kelley and to Morris Library for permission to quote from this essay and from "We Went Back to the Land."

³Matthew J. Bruccoli, Afterword, *The Devil's Hand* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 291.

⁴W. J. Alexander, Professor of English, Testimonial, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

⁵Edith and Allan Updegraff, trans., *The Stronger, Like Falling Leaves, Sacred Ground: Three Plays by Giuseppe Giacosa* (New York: M. Kennerley, 1913). There is an eight-page introduction by the Updegraffs.

The volume is part of The Modern Drama Series, edited by Edwin Bjorkman (see note 20). Not coincidentally, Freeman Tilden (note 19) also published a translation in this series in 1913. The Updegraffs spent their summers in the Berkshires, and near them lived the Bjorkmans and the Tildens ("We Went Back to the Land," TS, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale).

⁶Statements by Mrs. Kelley about when she published stories were vague. She told a reporter that she wrote "frothy and inconsequential" "magazine stories for a living" after she stopped working for Upton Sinclair, but she may have been deliberately inaccurate on that occasion, as she apparently did not speak of her marriage to Updegraff or of her teaching ("Author Has Unusual History; Friend of Famous People; Wife of Farmer-Sculptor," *San Diego Union*, 4 Nov. 1923; rpt. in Matthew J. Bruccoli, Afterword, *Weeds* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972], p. 338). She wrote in "Can an Artist Exist in America?" that while she was still in New York her stories began to be regularly rejected: "as long as I knew very little about anything and was hence content to say nothing in a pert and diverting way, I was encouraged to go on saying it and paid well for my trouble," but when "I began to try to write . . . stor[ies] that depicted the life about me as I actually saw it, that looked into the hearts of people," the stories were returned.

Sinclair Lewis wrote to Alfred Harcourt in 1921 that Edith Summers Kelley appeared to have "grown from the poetic yearnings she had fifteen years ago when I knew her best to real stuff for a good American novel" (*From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930*, ed. Harrison Smith [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952], p. 75). The "yearnings" to which Lewis refers are reflected in four poems she printed in 1907: three in *New England Magazine*, "The Sleeping Beauty" in January (p. 595), "The Infinite" in June (p. 485), and "Morning-Glories" in July (p. 577); and one in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, "Magic Door" in November (p. 660).

⁷Bruccoli, Afterword, *The Devil's Hand*, pp. 291-92.

⁸"We Went Back to the Land."

⁹In "Can an Artist Exist in America?" Edith Summers Kelley says that for ten years before she began *Weeds* she farmed, "first in Kentucky" and then elsewhere, and wrote "nothing at all." She dates her move to Kentucky in "We Went Back to the Land" as 1914; and Bruccoli in Afterword, *The Devil's Hand*, p. 292, gives this same year.

¹⁰"We Went Back to the Land." According to this essay, the "boardinghouse in New Jersey" which Bruccoli mentions (Afterword, *The Devil's Hand*, p. 292) was a farmhouse. To earn six hundred dollars they owed on the farm the Kelleys took in summer boarders.

¹¹Lewis, *From Main Street*, pp. 75, 87, 128, 130-32.

¹²Bruccoli, Afterword, *The Devil's Hand*, pp. 292-96. It is not clear

whether the grant for *The Devil's Hand* came from the American Fund for Public Service or from the southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (pp. 292-93n).

¹³Brucoli, Afterword, *Weeds*, p.335.

¹⁴"The Irrelevant Sixth Act," *The Nation*, 16 January 1924, p. 65.

¹⁵Meta Fuller (1880-1964) was Upton Sinclair's first wife. The couple married in 1900, and in 1901 a son David was born. Sinclair wrote in a letter of 1909 "because Meta was almost out of her mind, and I did not know what to do with David, I started Helicon Hall" (quoted in Howard H. Quint, "Upton Sinclair's Quest for Artistic Independence—1909," *American Literature*, 29 [May 1957], 195). Meta married twice after Upton Sinclair divorced her in 1912 (Leon Harris, *Upton Sinclair: American Rebel* [New York: Crowell, 1975], p. 365n).

¹⁶William Pepperell Montague (1873-1953) was on the faculties of Barnard and Columbia by 1907, and in 1941 was made Johnsonian professor at Columbia. During his long tenure there he was invited to lecture at other universities, including Yale, Harvard, and the University of Chicago; and was three times chairman of the delegation from the American Philosophical Association to the International Congress of Philosophy. Among his publications are *The Ways of Knowing: Or, the Methods of Philosophy* (1925), *Belief Unbound: A Promethean Religion for the Modern World* (1930), and *The Chances of Surviving Death* (1934). Montague created a philosophic vision which combined realism and Platonism.

Montague and his wife went to Helicon Hall, at least in part, because Helen Montague was studying in New York to become a medical doctor, and needed help in caring for their two children (Sinclair, *American*, p. 182).

¹⁷The specialty of William Noyes (1862-1928) was industrial education. He wrote about the importance of instruction in the manual arts, for instance, "The Function of Constructive Activities in Education," printed in 1908 in the *Journal of Education*, and about methods of teaching manual arts, as in *A Syllabus of a Course on Elementary Woodworking* (1913), published by Teachers College, Columbia University, where he was a professor. He published, in addition, four widely used books on wood and on techniques of woodworking. *Handwork in Wood* (1910) was issued in a revised edition in 1941 after his death.

¹⁸Anna Gausmann Noyes (1873-1972) was "appointed Manager of the Household" for Helicon Hall in the autumn of 1906 ("Upton Sinclair's Colony to Live at Helicon Hall," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1906, Sec.III, p. 2), and it was apparently she who supervised the housework of Sinclair Lewis and Allan Updegraff ("Two Yale Men in Utopia," *New York Sun*, 16 Dec. 1906; rpt. in *The Man from Main Street: A Sinclair Lewis Reader*, ed. Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane [New York: Random, 1953], pp. 61-69). Mrs. Noyes later conducted a small private school in Leonia, New Jersey. She published two books, *How I Kept My Baby Well* (1913), in which she told how she cared for her son Leonard, and *Three Petticoats*:

Margaret Van Brut Moore Gausmann (1955), which describes her mother (Telephone interview with Leonard Noyes, 8 April 1980).

¹⁹The publications of Freeman Tilden (1883-) are varied. In addition to the novels and stories mentioned by Mrs. Kelley, his work includes a volume of translations of plays by Henry Beque (1913); a one-act play, *Enter Dora—Exit Dad* (1922); and social analysis, *A World in Debt* (1936). Tilden is best known now, however, for his work on our national heritage, particularly in relation to our parks. *The National Parks*, first published in 1951 and put out in a second revised edition in 1970, and *The State Parks: Their Meaning in American Life* (1963), both published by Knopf, are standard reference titles.

²⁰Edwin Bjorkman (1866-1951) began his career in America by editing the Swedish-American-language newspaper *Minnesota Posten*. Later he was on the staff of several New York based publications, including *The New York Times*. In addition to writing criticism, novels, and poetry, he translated a wide range of works from German and the Scandinavian languages. By writing about Strindberg and by making the first translations into English of a number of Strindberg's dramas, he played a major role in introducing this writer to the American public. His treatment of subjects "sociological," included *Scandinavia and the War* (1914), published by Oxford University Press. He eventually settled in North Carolina. There he was State Director of the Federal Writers' Project, which produced *North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State* (1939).

Bjorkman's wife, Frances Maule (1879-1966), from whom he was divorced in 1918, was with him at Helicon Hall. She was an early supporter of women's suffrage, wrote books on careers, for example, *She Strives to Conquer* (1934) and *Girl with a Pay Check* (1941), and for twelve years edited *Independent Woman*.

²¹Michael Williams (1877-1950) became editor of *Commonweal* in 1924, when it was established. Among his numerous books on religion are *The Little Flower of Carmel* (1925) and *Catholicism and the Modern Mind* (1928).

Williams was Welsh by descent only, as he was born in Nova Scotia. Just prior to living at Helicon Hall, he resided in San Francisco, where he was city editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*. A section of the story in *The New York Times* on the fire at Helicon Hall, headed "Earthquake Victim Hit Again" contains remarks made by Williams after he escaped from the fire with his wife, Margaret, and two children. He concluded, "Two typewriters in such a short space of time is rather hard" ("Fire Wipes Out Helicon Hall," *New York Times*, 17 March 1907, p. 2).

His "expounding and defending" Catholicism eventually involved a

quarrel with Upton Sinclair. Sinclair attacked organized religion in *The Profits of Religion*, serialized in *Upton Sinclair's: A Monthly Magazine* during 1918. Williams responded with a review in *America*, "A Prophet for Profits," claiming that Sinclair wrote simply to gain money. Sinclair, who believed that Williams had owed him a large sum since 1908, considered that the writer was now adding insult to injury. In "How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth—," *Upton Sinclair's*, 1 (May/June 1918), 7 and "High Romance," *Upton Sinclair's*, 1 (July 1918), 7, he outlined the situation. Sinclair Lewis sided with Sinclair (Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* [New York: McGraw Hill, 1961], p. 219).

²²Alice MacGowan (1858-1947) and Grace MacGowan Cooke (1863-1944) were raised in Chattanooga, where their father was an editor of the *Chattanooga Times*. In addition to writing short stories, they published novels, some of which were set in the South. Their writings included Alice's *Judith of the Cumberlands* (1908), Grace's *The Power and the Glory* (1910), and the two sisters' *Wild Apples: A California Story* (1918) (Telephone interview with Kay Gaston, 30 April 1980). Grace MacGowan had two daughters by William Cooke, from whom she was divorced shortly after the fire at Helicon Hall (Schorer, p. 132). At the time of the fire Katharine Cooke was eight and Helen Cooke twelve ("Fire Wipes Out," p. 2).

Sinclair Lewis was fascinated by Helen's beauty, and he enjoyed the company of the adult sisters. In 1907 and 1908 he visited them at Douglaston, New York, where they were recuperating from the severe back injuries they received during the fire, and in 1909 he joined them at an artists' colony in Carmel, California. There he was to collaborate with them on a book, *Ecce Homo*, and be their "part-time secretary." The book was never written, and he left after about six months (Schorer, pp. 122, 132, 144-51).

²³Harry Leon Wilson (1867-1939) became known as a playwright, novelist, and contributor of short stories to the *Saturday Evening Post*. On plays he collaborated with Booth Tarkington. Their most successful production was *The Man from Home* (1908). His novels, which combine humor and pathos, included *Bunker Bean* (1913), *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1915), and *Merton of the Movies* (1922).

In 1912 Wilson moved permanently to Carmel, California, and married Helen Cooke, his third wife. They had two children, but were divorced in 1927 (Franklin Dickerson Walker, "Wilson, Harry Leon," *DAB*, Supp. 2 [1958]).

²⁴Through her lectures and writings, Emma Goldman (1869-1940) advocated an anarchism based on the free cooperation of small

associations. She also struggled to further such causes as family planning and freedom of speech, and helped to popularize the plays of European dramatists. With Alexander Berkman she published the radical periodical *Mother Earth* (1906-17). The United States deported her in 1919.

Mrs. Kelley is describing Stella Cominsky (1884-1961), the daughter of Emma Goldman's half-sister Lena (Letter received from Ian Ballantine, June 1980). Stella was an admirer and close friend of Emma Goldman and helped her with such matters as producing the *Mother Earth Bulletin* (1917-18) and finding a publisher for articles written from exile. Stella Cominsky married Teddy Ballantine (see Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961] and Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* [New York: Knopf, 1931]).

Sinclair Lewis spoke in a letter of seeing Emma Goldman and a young woman, probably Stella, selling refreshments at the Anarchists' Ball in 1910: "Beside [Emma Goldman] was her young niece, a tawny smooth cheeked girl, with hair so softly black and fine that it seemed more dusky than black" (Quoted in Schorer, p. 179).

²⁵Allan Updegraff (1883-1965) worked at times as a reporter or editor. He was, for instance, on the editorial board of *Literary Digest* from around 1918 to 1925 and was Paris correspondent for *Newsweek* in the late 1930s ("Former Newsmen Publishes Poetry," Newspaper clipping among Edith Summers Kelley's papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale). In addition to poetry and novels including *Strayed Revellers* (1918), he published *The Literary Digest Atlas of the New Europe and the Far East* (1922) and the translation, *The Biography of Andre Maginot: He Might Have Saved France* by Marguerite Joseph-Maginot (1941).

Mark Schorer described Updegraff as "the first friend" of Sinclair Lewis at Yale (p. 88). The pair left Helicon Hall before Christmas 1906 and shortly thereafter shared an apartment in New York (Schorer, p. 115). To the colonists Allan Updegraff was "Upde" and Sinclair Lewis was "Red."

²⁶Edith Summers Kelley described Lewis in her essay, "Can an Artist Exist in America?" written in the 1920s: "Somehow I can never think of him as a rich man, a celebrated man, a man whose opinions people respect. I see him always as a long, gawky, red-headed youth who was always exposing himself to the good natured ridicule of his companions because of his Celtic ebullience, his unbridled flights of fancy, his tendency to wear his heart on his sleeve. If he liked you he wanted to slap you on the back and call you by your first name the moment he met you whether you were a waitress in Child's or Tony the bootblack or the editor in chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*." In "We Went Back to the Land" she spoke of his

arrival at an old farm in the Berkshires which she and Allan Updegraff rented for "several summers": "Sinclair Lewis came to see us several times. The first time he came, Freeman Tilden happened to be at the house early the following morning, and among other small talk remarked that a crazy fellow had gone past his house the evening before just about sunset, a tall, lanky, red-headed chap, without a hat, carrying a small grip, waving his free arm demoniacally in the air and singing at the top of his voice. We laughed and told him that the lunatic was our guest, who was now upstairs sleeping off the excitement of his first vacation smell of God's great out-of-doors."

²⁷In "Two Yale Men in Utopia" (p. 64), Lewis and Updegraff wrote of "that 'mouse gray' water, as Yeats calls it." Yeats used the phrase "mouse-grey waters" in "The Pity of Love," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 40.

²⁸Sadakichi Hartmann (1867-1944) owed his unusual appearance to the fact that his mother was Japanese and his father German. He wrote poetry and plays and was a recognized art critic. His life was colorful. He was jailed in Boston in 1893 on a charge that *Christ*, the first of his free-verse dramas, was obscene; around the turn of the century Greenwich Villagers named him the "King of Bohemia" (Fred E. H. Schroeder, "Hartmann, Carl Sadakichi," *DAB*, Supp. 3 [1973]).

Hartmann arrived at Helicon Hall drunk, and, according to Upton Sinclair, without a proper invitation. Upton Sinclair abhorred alcohol (Schorer, p. 113). When Hartmann and Davidson insisted on trying to sleep in front of the fireplace, they were forced to leave. A Miss Lhevinne who had accompanied them departed at the same time. Hartmann indignantly described the incident to a reporter for *The New York Times*; Sinclair replied, asking the *Times* to print a letter he had received from Hartmann in which Hartmann admitted that he had visited the Hall, because he "had an order from one of the leading magazines to write a semi-humorous article on your colony" ("Helicon Hall Cold to Visiting Trio," *New York Times*, 17 Feb. 1907, Sec. 5, p. 15; "The Helicon Hall Invasion," *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 1907, p. 10).

²⁹Jo Davidson (1883-1952) began carving portrait busts early in the century but did not start becoming famous until, at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, he received commissions for busts of a number of generals and heads of state. His sitters eventually included such varied figures as Albert Einstein, Benito Mussolini, and Sinclair Lewis; and Guy Pène du Bois could note that the time would come when a man could not be considered great unless he had sat for Jo Davidson (Lawrence Campbell, "Davidson, Jo," *DAB*, Supp. 5 [1977]).

³⁰Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), honored by being portrayed on a U.S. postage stamp in 1980, was a leading feminist. In 1898 she published *Women and Economics*, in which she argued that women should become financially independent in order to be free to develop aspects of their personalities other than those involving their relationships with men and that the realization of women's potential would benefit society as a whole. She mentioned in *Women and Economics* that centralized nurseries and cooperative kitchens would free women from drudgery. Later in *Concerning Children* (1900) and *The Home* (1903) she expanded these ideas. She was married twice but never devoted herself to housework.

In forming the Helicon Home Colony, Upton Sinclair was, as he recognized, putting into practice theories in Mrs. Gilman's writings (*The Industrial Republic* [New York: Doubleday, Page, 1907], p. 261).

³¹John Russell Coryell (1851-1924) originated the character of the detective Nick Carter, whose name many authors have used as a pseudonym on stories of the detective's adventures. The first of the six stories Coryell wrote as Nicholas Carter was the serial, "The Old Detective's Pupil," published in the *New York Weekly* in 1884. Later Coryell turned out hundreds of sentimental novels for women readers. One of the several feminine pseudonyms he used for these novels was "Bertha M. Clay," a name which had been the American pseudonym of the British writer, Charlotte M. Braeme. Coryell was a friend of Emma Goldman (Goldman, *Living My Life*, I, 336), and his anarchist views are reflected in articles he wrote for *Mother Earth*, including "Comstockery" and "Marriage and the Home" in the first two issues.

³²Describing somewhat satirically the inhabitants of Helicon Hall, Michael Williams in *The Book of High Romance: A Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), p. 145, appears to refer to Mrs. Kelley's "John the Baptist." Again the young man's actual name is not given: "There was a young Southerner who having run through nearly all other formulas was thinking of trying sequestration in a Benedictine monastery."